

## Reading for difference' with Payments for Ecosystem Services in Wales

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# **‘Reading for difference’ with Payments for Ecosystem Services in Wales.**

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper critically engages with on-going concerns surrounding the neoliberalisation of nature, through a focus upon emerging environmental schemes in Wales, offering payments for ecosystem services. Here, neoliberal directives are clearly evident in the discourses of the Welsh Government and policy advisors, through the reframing of the environment as a source of saleable goods and services. However, it is argued that gaps can be found within this seeming consensus, by following Gibson–Graham’s imperative to ‘read for difference’ within political-economic practice. Specifically, by exploring the everyday knowledge and practices of land managers who are being asked to deliver ecosystem goods and services, a more pluralistic reading begins to emerge. Hence, it is argued that the existence of such ‘cracks’ within an otherwise apparently extant hegemony need to be taken seriously, in order to unsettle the otherwise unquestioned suitability of a neoliberal model of environmental governance.*

## **1. Introduction**

*What we call land is an element of nature inexplicably interwoven with man's institutions. To isolate it and form a market out of it was perhaps the weirdest of all undertakings of our ancestors ...The economic function is but one of many vital functions of land.*

(Polanyi 1944: 178)

Despite the promise of a post-neoliberal juncture in the wake of international financial crises, it is apparent that old habits die hard. Particularly in the realm of environment policy it is evident that neoliberal doctrine holds strong, with carbon markets and payments for ecosystem services now proffering the complexities of the earth's system processes as commodities for sale. This is despite an increasing acknowledgement that ecological problems are unavoidably connected to the political-economic system (Foster 2002; Keil 2007; Buscher and Arsel 2012). Moreover, that the neoliberalisation of nature not only represents a further colonisation of previous externalities (McCarthy and Prudham 2004), but acts as a critical juncture in the advance of capitalism given the potentially fundamental contradictions arising from such processes of commodification (O'Connor 1998; Bakker 2010). As such, the apparent acceptability, and indeed necessity, of deploying neoliberal mechanisms for environmental management is seen as a key paradox to be unpacked as part of a wider project of critical engagement with neoliberal hegemony.

This paper addresses the development of Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), an area where the tensions surrounding neoliberal advance are particularly acute, with critiques such as Spash (2008a, 2011) and Sullivan (2006) outlining the short-sightedness and inconsistency in environmentalists' recent adoption of neoliberal models. To clarify, PES is a term now used to describe a range of government and private sector initiatives which aim to commodify

the previously ‘un-valued’ components and processes of ecosystems, which would otherwise be regarded as environmental externalities in conventional readings of production and economic exchange. PES incorporate these externalities by applying economic value to things that are otherwise treated as ‘zero-cost’ resources, in order that they may be governed in accordance with market exchange principles (Gomez-Baggethun, et.al 2010). PES includes a range of different schemes, which accommodate differing degrees of commodification and marketization. For example, payments from quasi-government bodies to peasant farmers, for water and biodiversity benefits, in rainforest regions of Latin America (Kosoy et.al 2008; McAfee and Shapiro 2010); and wetland mitigation banking in the US by real-estate companies who wish to off-set the damage from developments on existing wetlands (Robertson, 2004).

This paper focuses on the development of the PES model in Wales, focusing on the case-study of payments to farmers for environmental management, in order to outline how the hegemony of neoliberal governance can be placed in question. In Wales, as in the UK more broadly, it is evident that government policy discourse leans towards market framings. However, the paper looks beyond government influence to consider the challenges evident in the understandings of stakeholders involved in the operation of PES. Read from a governmentality perspective (Larner 2000; Miller and Rose 2008), the attraction of market mechanisms to these stakeholders is clear, as their identities are aligned with archetypes of the neoliberal subjectivity, desiring freedom, individual responsibility, and the promise of success through entrepreneurial behaviour (see Wynne-Jones 2012). Yet to read again, this time for difference, for deviations and contradictions to neoliberal norms, and a more complex picture emerges.

Reading for difference is a strategy that was developed by J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008) as part of their project for post-capitalist politics and alternative economies. Adopting a post-structural feminist approach to political economy, they argue that economic ‘structures’ are always dependent upon the performance and iterations of compliant subjects. Drawing on Foucault’s theorisation of governmentality, they see the achievement of hegemony as a process of repeated practise and inscribed procedure, through which complicit assumptions and behavioural codes become routine (see also Larner 2000; Li 2007). But given the on-going nature of these processes, identity and subjectivity are ‘de-essentialised’. Thus, whilst hegemony is understood as a process of subjection, where-in subjects are made, it is also one in which subjects make themselves (Gibson-Graham 2006: 23; following Butler 1997), and there-in they propose a means of contesting hegemony.

Following this performative reading, Gibson-Graham set out the imperative to read for difference as a means to draw out the counter narratives and the possibilities already existing within the present, which offer an alternative to our neoliberal norms. By attending to these cracks within capitalism (Holloway 2010), they assert the plurality of our present political-economic identities, systems of exchange, and forms of capital. Here the ‘Nowtopian’ narratives of Chris Carlsson (2008), and *Autonomous Geographies* detailed by The Autonomous Geography Collective (2010), similarly provide an important insight into the subaltern, which we can draw upon to develop wider counter-hegemonic visions.

Reading for difference provides an important tool in the analysis of these counter narratives, because it can be all too easy to find the neoliberal latent within. For example, in Harris’ (2009) discussion of alternative food networks it is acknowledged that this seemingly alternative movement could be framed as another form of ‘niche’ market, and therefore does

not move beyond the trap of appealing to the individualist consumer choice. Hence, alternative networks can easily be co-opted into neoliberal frameworks (Guthman 2008). Yet, Harris (2009) argues for a different reading, to attend to the more-than-neoliberal aspects of these networks, and take them seriously as nascent challenges, even though they can still be seen to comply on some levels. Similarly, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) draw out the ways in which activist groups are simultaneously positioned as being both ‘within’ and ‘beyond’ capitalism, a framing that can also be applied to Carlsson’s cyclists, allotment holders and inventors (2008).

Within these examples, the rupture of consumer-producer relations, assumptions surrounding labour, the conception of capital, and attitudes towards the common, are addressed as key challenges to the status-quo. Yet, it is not only the self-proclaimed activists, and the diggers and dreamers of our world, who provide scope for such readings. In fact, Gibson-Graham’s (2006) original inspiration came from working with people who were clearly subjected by the logics of capitalism. But these communities had become open to possibility due to the pressures on them from economic restructuring programmes, which presented the opportunity of crisis enabling them to approach change in a way they would not otherwise have done. Others have begun to consider reading for difference as a strategy that can be employed in more unlikely circumstances. North (forthcoming) has asserted the necessity of appreciating the more-than-economic motivations of city entrepreneurs, questioning how these more pluralistic readings can be harnessed in the transition towards a more sustainable model of business and city-life. Whilst Halfacree (2010) has asserted an alternative vision of rural-incomers, arguing against conservative interpretations to position their life strategies as an enaction of heterotopias which should be taken seriously. Citing Holloway (2002), he stresses

that “*People have million ways of saying no... we are all revolutionaries, albeit in very contradictory, fetishized, repressed ways*” (Halfacree 2010: 258).

Similarly reasserting the importance of returning to the everyday, and the role of performative practice, Robyn Dowling (2011) reflects upon the surprising potential of Australia’s middle-class suburban households. Aiming to address the environmental crises of climate change and excessive consumption, her work looks for hope within an area that could so easily be seen as the unresolvable heart of the problem. But she doesn’t do this by looking for wider ideological affinities, or an aspiration for whole-sale change. Rather, she considers the everyday events and practices that unintentionally enact difference, and how these can be nurtured, alongside their associated ways of being and ways of knowing ourselves. This is a model that has also been highlighted by Brown et al.’s ESRC seminar series on Sustainability Transitions<sup>1</sup>, where clear reference has been made to the importance of subjectivity and identity politics as a key factor within the understanding of transition. Overall, it is evident that a focus upon everyday practice and individuals’ subjectivity is important not only to understand neoliberal hegemony, but also to work towards its undoing.

This paper applies such a reading to the understanding of Payments for Ecosystem Services associated with a range of government and non-government initiatives in Wales, drawing out the deviations and differences present that challenge the assumed preference for a market-style model of governance. In terms of the paper’s structure, section 2 will outline the ways in which PES are being developed in line with neoliberal sensibilities. Section 3 will then outline the potential to read for difference. To conclude, Section 4 will discuss the ways in which this methodology offers a distinct challenge to neoliberal hegemony, and the particular

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://sustainabilitytransitions.info/> [last accessed March 13<sup>th</sup> 2012].



benefits of employing such techniques to the understanding of neoliberal natures. The paper is informed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted over three years with NGO's and policy makers involved in the development of PES schemes (see Wynne-Jones 2012 for further details), and fifty semi-structured interviews with farmers across Wales as part of the Wales Rural Observatory's (2012) Farmers' Decision Making Project<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. Payments for Ecosystem Services in Wales as Neoliberal Governmentality**

In Wales, as in the UK more broadly, there has been an upsurge in interest around the notion of PES since the findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), after which the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs set up an ecosystems research programme<sup>3</sup>. This then fed into a broader report, led by the United Nations Environment Programme, into 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity' (TEEB 2010) which was commissioned at the G8 meeting in Potsdam in 2007.

Within Wales, the Government first adopted the ecosystem service discourse in the development of their new agri-environment scheme, starting in 2008. Here schemes operating as part the Wales Rural Development Plan, and broader EU Common Agricultural Policy, have been adapted to offer payments for ecosystem services to farmers, with the government operating as an intermediary between the public and these private land managers (see Wynne-Jones 2013 for further details). As such, this government-led agri-environment scheme is set to act as a key mechanism for the advance of the PES framework in the UK. And as I have argued elsewhere (ibid), these developments show a clear deference to neoliberal discourses, with the following outtakes providing an indication of this:

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.walesruralobservatory.org.uk/eng/pub-e.html> [last access 13th March 2012].

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.ecosystems-services.org.uk/eservpr.htm> [last access 13th March 2012].

*...for the current [schemes] the economic model is seen as being the appropriate one to take in developing land management schemes since it emphasises the relationship between land management and the production of outputs...* (WAG 2008).

*The purpose of [this] agri-environment scheme [is] to enable WAG to buy environmental goods and services from farmers that are not supplied through normal market mechanisms. WAG is therefore the customer and the farmer is the supplier.* (WAG 2009).

Overall, whilst it is clear that the Welsh scheme does not act as a ‘pure’ market in ecosystem services, it does represent a significant advance of neoliberal techniques. This has been done through the extension of new forms of commodification, in the reframing of the environment as a source of ‘goods and services’, and casting the farmer as a neoliberal subject primarily motivated to act in accordance with economic incentive. In particular, it is argued that the attachment of economic value to previously held externalities will now provide an incentive for farmers to consider these resources, which they would otherwise overlook:

*Land owners and farming interests have latched onto the economic benefits – managing and farming carbon - they may not be entirely comfortable with the notion, but they have understood that there is potentially an economic benefit...*

(Land Use Planning Policy Officer, 29/5/08)

In this manner, the government suggest that they are taking a lead from farmers' own interests and behavioural norms. However, it is equally clear that their scheme is designed to encourage farmers to behave in more business orientated and ostensibly neoliberal ways, responding to criticisms that farmers are too subsidy dependent and not sufficiently orientated towards the market (Representative from Welsh Government's Business, Enterprise, Technology and Science Division 23/8/11). In particular, it is notable that previous environmental payment schemes were criticised for acting as unqualified grants to farmers and encouraging a culture of dependency:

*...[the previous scheme] has no requirements for outputs... it was part of a crusade to keep farmers in the uplands... of course farmers love it because they don't have to demonstrate any outputs..."*

(NGO Policy Advocate 21/5/08)

*"Getting this message across to land managers, that [environmental payments] are not income support schemes, requires a significant cultural shift within the agricultural community..."*

(WAG 2008, p5)

As such, it is clear that the government are not only relying upon the basis of economic priority and self-interest within existing behavioural practise, but are also trying to promote and reinforce what they regard as more desirable forms of subjectivity; in a manner that clearly echoes previous governmental reforms (Larner 2000; Miller and Rose 2008).

In addition to these government-led developments, there are a number of smaller NGO-operated schemes now emerging across Wales similarly piloting a neoliberal-inspired approach to PES. Here-in, ecosystem services are cast as business opportunities rather than top-down prescriptions, or objects of State regulation, with conservation works tendered to

farmers in order to connect the payment to the job, and so provide greater incentives to take environmental works seriously. This is shown in the following extract:

*...we are working on a model for a new scheme that is less prescriptive and more a means of doing business – not telling farmers what to do, but asking them whether they want the contract for jobs that agencies can tender. The farmers can then value these jobs themselves and get on and do them. This way, payments can be presented more as an effective business opportunity, rather than schemes as income support, which is the way they are failing at the moment.*

(Wildlife Trust 20/9/07).

The rationality presented in official documentation and interview responses is that these PES schemes are being developed to respond to farmers' preference for greater independence in their work and the chance to innovate, to produce the required outcomes through their own means, rather than following standardised procedure. Consequently, the schemes are being designed to place responsibility with the farmers, to make decisions about how they manage their land to achieve particular ends, rather than being forced to follow prescriptions which have been critiqued as inappropriate and dictatorial. In this manner, it is assumed that farmers will become more responsive to the need to protect the environment.

Again there is something of a tension between the extent to which scheme developers are aiming to re-construct farmers' in a new mould, as neoliberal subjects, and the extent which they are reinforcing pre-existing traits. However, it should be noted that the adoption of these strategies has been done in consultation with the farming unions and through local stakeholder engagement in the case of the smaller NGO projects. Consequently, it is evident

that the push for greater independence, flexibility, and the opportunity to innovate, has been informed by recommendations from the farming community. As such, advocacy of PES could be seen as a pragmatic attempt to harness these sensibilities; as well as serving the aims of those who would wish to see farmers become more accountable in their environmental and economic practice (see Wynne-Jones 2012).

Overall, both the government and NGO approaches can be closely aligned with neoliberal governmentality, through the prioritisation of a distinctly independent, responsible, and market-orientated actor. And as with other advances of governmentality (eg. Higgins 2005; Lockie and Higgins 2007), it is apparent that PES is being designed to work *with* existing characteristics and behaviour norms, rather than being imposed as an unwelcome form of privatisation on a resistant community. However, by ‘reading for difference’ a more complex understanding of farmers’ identities and priorities begins to emerge, as I will go onto outline in the following section.

### **3. Reading for Difference**

Whilst it is apparent that many of the characteristics and sensibilities of the neoliberal subject are seen as desirable by farmers, this does not necessarily equate with the belief that payments for ecosystem services are the most effective way of achieving environmental governance. Rather, as the following discussion will set out, it is apparent that farmers’ understandings of the environment, and environmental service delivery, present some distinct challenges to the neoliberal rationalities evident in PES models. In addition, it is evident that farmers’ often appreciate the need for governance which meets collective goals, and may not be best served by an appeal to the individual desires associated with neoliberal governance.

Consequently, it is argued that the framing of farmers' as neoliberal subjects provides only a limited insight into their motivations and affinities.

### **3.1 Attitudes towards Payments for Ecosystem Services**

To begin with the question of farmers' perception of environmental service delivery, and their response to the notion of being paid for discrete goods and services, a clear challenge is presented in farmers' prioritisation of food provision, with other services seen as an interconnected part of a food producing system. Specifically, the majority of the farmers interviewed argued that they would not be prepared to shift their livelihoods away from food production to focus solely on other outputs associated with land management (eg. carbon and water), because they understood that by farming in a traditional manner they could continue to produce food *and* manage the environment together. As such, they questioned the imperative to divide up the functions of their land into the delivery of distinct goods and services, suggesting instead that they would rather continue with a form of farming that provides things in synergy.

Scaling this argument up, they highlight the incoherence of government policy given the increased prioritisation of environmental goals at a time when national food supply continues to rely heavily on imports. In particular, it was argued that more could be done for the environment by prioritising greater local procurement and a focus on sustainable agricultural techniques rather than trying to divide up food production and environmental care into separate policy agendas and production processes:

*These policies don't make sense... I think now is the time Wales should be thinking right, food's going to get more expensive, we should move imports down... we need to become 80% self-sufficient ...we need to be depending more on organic... going down the line where we can become less dependent on oil based products.*

*(Respondent 13)*

In addition, when farmers were asked whether they would be prepared to 'diversify' into ecosystem service delivery as their main form of business, if it became a more profitable form of enterprise than food production, a high proportion of farmers argued that they would not. This is because they would not be prepared to compromise the future viability of their land for food production, by degrading its agricultural potential through vegetation encroachment or soil changes associated with the prioritisation of other services. As such, they argued that they were considering the long-term of their farm, above and beyond the potential of short-term income security from environmental payments. These arguments are set out in the following extracts:

*INT: Would you see ecosystem services as a way of diversifying?*

*RES: No. You might get one or two people who would, but... I'm talking to you as somebody who's got four sons who want the farm ...I'm not talking about me who wants to cut back on the work because of my age. If I'd got no sons perhaps...yes I might as well go up for every penny I can get for doing nothing but that isn't what my lads want to do.*

*(Respondent 1)*

*RES: ...you have to make business decisions at the end of the day and if you are offered money to take the sheep off the hill... it is very difficult to go against that from a business point of view... but for how long you can make those short term business decisions to the detriment of the long term...once you get to a certain stage you cannot build back up and if the grass is too rough for them to graze in the first place it is almost impossible.*

*(Respondent 2)*

From this evidence, it is apparent that farmers' decisions are not simply steered by a focus on short term profit. Rather, their priorities also encompass the long-term and family security, alongside a belief in the maintained importance of their role as food producers as a central figure of their identity. Whilst this could be regarded as farmers acting as stubborn traditionalists, and behaving in closed-minded and un-progressive manner, the imperative of reading for difference pushes us to cast these findings in a more optimistic light. That is, to see these priorities as important challenges to the dogma of neoliberal ideology, and the assumed deference to economic rationalities. Moreover, the more holistic understandings of land-use and food production outlined are clearly at odds with the forms of specialisation and production efficiencies associated with a more neoliberal model, and the type of subject identities and priorities that are required to perpetrate such an approach. Simply seeing the land as a source of commodities, whether it is carbon or carrots, is not a position the interviewees ascribed to, as they were not seeking to maximise the efficiency of one 'good' or 'service', but appreciated the complexity and synergistic relationships at work in their production processes.

Reinforcing the importance of the farmers' position, it is notable that these understandings also resonate with longstanding arguments for agriculture as a multifunctional activity, which



run counter to the current shift towards PES in its attempts to disaggregate processes of land management in to discrete products and functions. Moreover, advocates of a strong multifunctional vision (Hollander 2008) would argue against the spatial differentiation that can be associated with the specialisation of production associated with PES. In other words, it is argued that PES can result in a more zoned landscape where areas of food production are separated from areas delivering carbon and water regulation (; McAfee and Shapiro 2010; Wynne-Jones 2013). Welsh Government representatives are very aware of the difficulties associated with such geographical divergences, and argue that this is not the aim of current developments (Welsh Government Representative from Business, Enterprise, Technology and Science division interview 23/8/11). However, it is possible that this tension could arise given the current emphasis upon mapping and targeting optimal areas for different forms of service delivery (WAG 2012), and the discussion of trade-offs and efficiencies in policy debates (McCall 2009).

### **3.2 Attitudes towards Subsidies and Markets**

A second area of interest, which further supports these more plural readings of farmers' affiliations, is their attitudes towards the receipt of government subsidies and their assumed preference for market returns. This issue is a critical one for policy makers seeking to address on-going reforms of the EU Common Agricultural Policy, where-in the reduction of State monies paid to farmers is evident as a key priority. Equally, it is evident that pressures from the WTO are an important determinant on the areas where governments are allowed to direct public monies, given concerns about trade distortion that have arisen with previous CAP

payments (Potter and Burney 2002). Consequently, with the subsidies that they do continue to pay, there is a need to show clearer public benefits. In addition, the negative perception of subsidies has been extended with the argument that farmers would prefer not to be seen as the recipients of unqualified benefits, given the negative associations of welfare payments in recent years. Consequently, policy makers and NGO's have argued that it would be better to present farmers as business people providing and selling public goods to the government (WAG 2008).

In the interviews conducted many farmers agreed with this viewpoint, noting a stigma attached to subsidies and arguing that they would prefer to receive a better price for their produce and do without government support. Yet, it was also clear that they felt that this was an unrealistic option, because without the remaining CAP subsidies food prices would have to increase to a level that is unsustainable for the consumer. As such, they saw farm support payments as a means to subsidise food for the benefit of the wider population. As a counterpoint, it could be argued that farmers are simply being regressive and trying to maintain their own financial security and avoid full exposure to the markets. Yet it was clear that many of the interviewees were not only trying to protect their own interests, but were critical on a broader level about the role and power of the supermarkets. As a consequence, they stated that they did not see the market as a fair and desirable device, given the potential for corruption from powerful corporations. In particular, a number of interviewees argued that more centralised models of planning and regulation, such as the Milk Marketing Board which was removed under Thatcher, were more effective and fairer systems than the current stranglehold of supermarkets:

*The Milk Marketing Board...guaranteed a regular price for liquid milk, it did loads of brilliantly good things. It guaranteed a thriving farming industry, because people knew what their incomes were and they could plan on that, they could adjust, they could plan for expansion, investment in their farms, everything else. And they broke it up because they said it was a monopoly. Well, yeah, but it was a non-profit monopoly.*

*(Respondent 20)*

Developing these points, respondents went on to outline how the fickle nature of markets did not always suit their methods of planning and decision making, and often exposed them to a higher degree of risk than centrally planned models. Equally, a number of cross-overs were evident with the arguments put forward by advocates of Community Supported Agriculture and similar co-operative ventures, which enable producers to by-pass the supermarket and work directly with consumers, who then have a greater stake in the production process, and share some of the risk inhered in production. Whilst this is not to suggest that all farmers are looking to initiate new models of consumer-producer relations, it is clear that a broader demographic are concerned about the outcomes of the current market model.

Consequently, whilst many are swayed by a personal desire to present themselves as successful business people, without a dependence upon the State, they do not esteem themselves solely in these narrow terms. Rather, it is evident that many farmers have a greater level of attachment to their role as food producers, which they defend in relation to the need for national food security and frustrations around imports. As a result they are able to look beyond their ego, as associated with financial independence and entrepreneurial success, and consider wider collective goods which may require State or other forms of mutual aid, along with intervention in the markets.

### **3.3 Co-operative Working**

A final area of note was the importance of co-operative working amongst the farming community. This was particularly evident amongst hill farmers who had common grazing land, where they manage animals through the sharing of labour and often machinery. Working together is a practise that has long been essential for these farmers, and it is central to the way they understand and interact with their neighbours and communities. But also in the way they position themselves, and their own identity as ‘commoners’ working within a wider unit of land where they are interdependent on the labour and friendship of others. Moreover, it was evident that in times of increasing financial hardship, many were attempting to spread costs and support more vulnerable community members.

Whilst these cultural norms have long been held amongst farmers in remote and challenging locations (Gray 2000; Howells 2005), what is important to highlight here is the way they challenge the narrow framing of farmers as individualistic and competitive business people. In particular, whilst it was evident that independence and a competitive spirit were important facets of farmers’ identity (WRO 2012), they often exist alongside the co-operative commitments outlined. As such, it is evident that communal goals and interdependence are skills and priorities which farmers do possess, in conjunction with the more neoliberal attributes highlighted by market advocates.

Here it is notable that the Welsh Government has expressed an interest in communal forms of management, as something which is essential for environmental gains through the advance of management across a landscape area or catchment (CCRI 2009). Hence it has been

acknowledged that environmental sustainability will require, at least in part, some orientation towards communal working and common goods. Equally, it is evident that the resilience of farm businesses may depend upon uncoded transactions and forms of mutual aid which are not adequately acknowledged in the current policy discourses that valorise the benefits of market-led governance.

#### **4. Discussion**

Taking an overview of the above insights, it is evident that a number of divergences from the archetypes of neoliberal subjectivity are apparent. These include:

- The prioritisation of farmers' role as food producers and their families' future security above the importance of short term financial profits;
- The understanding of farming as a holistic and multifunctional mode of production where goods are produced in synergy, in place of a focus on efficiencies in production and the prioritisation of specific commodities;
- The questioning of market governance as the most socially equitable system, and an acknowledgement of the need for centralised planning;
- The importance of co-operative working and mutual aid.

In terms of policy delivery these points raise some important considerations for the new schemes, which I address elsewhere (WRO 2012). What is critical to the discussion of this paper is the way that these readings unsettle the hegemony of the neoliberal position that is espoused in the thinking of the NGO and government policy makers who are advocating PES. If we understand the success of neoliberal governmentality as dependent upon the

action of complicit subjects, these findings undermine the assertion of PES advocates that farmers would act primarily as neoliberal subjects. This, therefore, challenges the inherent allure of market-style solutions as the most effective way of targeting them to engage with environmental management.

Of course, if we return to the point made earlier, in section 2, it is clear that the argument is not so simple, and that PES advocates are not only working with pre-existing rationalities, but are actively aiming to enhance and construct particular mentalities. As such, reading for difference allows us to identify the project to refigure citizens all the more clearly, because we can see the work required to streamline and advance particular behavioural forms in place of the diversity that we witness through Gibson-Graham's approach. Moreover, we are reminded that neoliberal governmentality is an always on-going, incomplete, and inherently fraught project (Li 2007). Hence, the challenge of reading for difference is not only to identify difference, but to celebrate its presence as legitimate rather than malign or in need of correction and erasure (Gibson-Graham 2006); a point I expand upon below.

Given the arguments used by environmentalists (including the NGO's noted) to defend PES as a pragmatic move rather than one that is ideologically motivated (see Spash 2008a; Wynne-Jones 2012), this broadening of the frame of value is particularly important, as it demonstrates how short-sighted such advocates are being, and how they are actually behaving in a very political fashion by valorising one select model of behaviour. As Spash (2011) has outlined, this 'pragmatic' stance from environmentalists is very much in danger of erasing other forms of value which cannot be measured in economic terms, and do not contribute to continued capital accumulation.

This is not to suggest that farmers do not have *any* affinity with the neoliberal sensibilities that are prioritised by advocates of PES, but to assert the importance of a wider array of factors in their decision making, and attend to a broader range of characteristics and orientations. In this manner, reading for difference is cast as a political action as much as it is an analytical tool. Acknowledging the performative role of theory, Gibson-Graham (2008) argue that reading for difference offers us a way to draw out the marginalised narratives that exist alongside, but are often subsumed within, the hegemonic discourses of our time. This is a strategy that not only allows us to legitimate and push forward understandings and representations that are otherwise elided, but also offers a hopeful act of defiance. As such, it enables us to take seriously positions and actions which can otherwise be derided as regressive, or somehow compromised. Reading for difference, therefore, creates a space to take half-formed challenges seriously, to accept their incompleteness and flaws, and focus on the promise they do hold, even if they are full of contradiction (Harris 2009; Halfacree 2010).

As such, whilst many of the insights advanced in section 3 could be read as ways in which farmers are conservative traditionalists, who refuse to engage with contemporary thinking and business strategy and are only concerned to protect their own personal and family interests, reading for difference pushes us to take a more optimistic stance. Whilst many NGO staff and civil servants within the Welsh Government are of the opinion that farmers' need to become more responsive and responsible (Wynne-Jones 2012, 2013) this paper has tried to consider another approach. Drawing out the positive aspects of farmers' practice, the paper highlights their co-operative systems of work, their collective sympathies and social consciousness, and their holistic interpretations of production processes. Taking these positions seriously, as a means to counter neoliberal hegemony, pushes us to assert their validity as practices and ways of knowing which should be supported and maintained. As

such, we can move beyond current strategies to ‘correct’ and streamline them into preferential models of neoliberal behaviour, or delimit behavioural choices (Jones et.al 2011).

Moreover, by validating these ‘alternative’ behavioural practices, the illogic and tensions within neoliberal governance become much clearer. For example, by acknowledging the existence of communal care and mutual aid, it becomes all the more evident that a shift to market governance demonstrates a lack of trust in people, because such a move is premised on a belief and appeal to peoples’ selfish instincts. By accepting and reinforcing the presence of co-operative working and responsibility, we move away from the need for governance to mediate individual priorities and appreciate that the grounds for more collective and communal systems are already there. Hence, we can begin to argue that what we really need are better political tools, and more considered social relations to enable greater levels of dialogue over the maintenance and provision of environmental benefits, and a fuller engagement with notions of the common and collective good.

Here, it is also important to acknowledge the concerns of psychologists and philosophers who have argued that a heightened focus upon economic values is not only in danger of misconstruing how people understand and interact with their environment, but more worryingly that this limited focus can actively crowd-out and transform our value systems (Crompton 2010; Frey and Jegen 2001; Spash 2008a). As such, we are returned to Gibson-Graham’s (2008) arguments about the power of performativity, and the need to actively practise alternatives, even in a nascent state, because otherwise we are in danger of losing the ability to imagine and create these ways of being.



Nevertheless, this is a position that is somewhat at odds with the current priorities of academics and policy makers engaged in the advance of PES, who are concerned with how to achieve measures of value so that we can ‘cost’ the ‘price’ of maintaining such ‘goods and services’. Yet, ironically, a growing body of ecological economics research is similarly highlighting the need for deliberative processes and a renewed focus on the social context of valuation (Holland 1995; Kenter et.al 2011; Lo and Spash 2012; Spash 2008b). As such, even by working within the framework of economic methodologies, the need for more plural and politically attuned systems of governance is starting to become apparent, and consequently is now being addressed by emerging research in this field<sup>4</sup>.

In addition, the evidence that farmers are committed to the longer term and the viability of their enterprise for future generations, again demonstrates an important priority that should be nurtured as a key standpoint in achieving sustainability, rather than marginalised by encouraging them to focus on short-term financial priorities. Similarly, the acknowledgement of food production as an interconnected process, with a range of environmental outcomes, is an understanding that needs to be reinforced rather than undermined by a focus on the different marketable commodities available. Overall, reading for difference demonstrates that the impetus of market solutions is both narrow-minded and counter-productive in many ways, as the emphasis on a neoliberal model of behaviour can be seen to reinforce many of the attributes that have created the environmental problems PES are now setting out to resolve.

Taking these insights in conjunction with wider analyses of PES (Muradian et.al 2010), and neoliberal natures more broadly (Bakker 2010), it is evident that consensus has begun to form around arguments for a more hybrid model of governance; within some quarters of the

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see: <http://www.valuing-nature.net/vnn-projects> [last accessed 30/3/2012].

academic community at least. Consequently, it could be argued that if academics and policy makers are to use the ecosystem service discourse at all, as a means to acknowledge the value of environmental externalities, we need to do it in a way that does not pretend that markets can achieve successful governance on their own. As such, whilst some policy documentation indicates that it would be preferable to enact further privatisation in future (WAG 2008, 2010), and that governments' role is to legitimate and nurture PES to attract private investors over the longer term (Defra 2012), the reading here suggests that government needs to maintain a strong role in the overall control of these mechanisms. This is to ensure the collective benefits of food and environmental security are met, but also because a more divisive and complete form of commodification is seen as problematic. So, whilst it is laudable to acknowledge the importance of ecosystem management, and offer financial support and rewards for this, trying to divide ecosystem function into discrete goods and services with their own individual prices is not an appropriate outcome.

Moreover, the analysis here enables us to appreciate that whilst neoliberal solutions can seem desirable, due to some characteristics and behavioural associations, these are not fixed or non-negotiable. Instead it is apparent that farmers can take a considered and reflective approach, as they have done in their discussions of food prices and concerns attached to government subsidies. Therefore, the potential for a more engaged and participatory model of governance, which does not frame individuals in narrow economic terms, is again reinforced. As such, it is evident that predominately Statist solutions are not the only alternative to the market, and that greater democratic involvement in the management of public 'goods' is equally desirable (see Cumbers 2012). This also addresses one of the primary reasons for a need to move to market governance. That is, the need for greater individual control and responsiveness.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the everyday nature of the challenges to neoliberal governance, which are illuminated by reading for difference. These are challenges which are often manifest in forms we are not used to seeing as political, but are all the more powerful for this banality and routine enactment. De-politicisation is a tool that has been used to advance neoliberal rule (Swyngedouw 2007). To bring about its undoing, it is therefore key to attend to the building blocks of opposition which are already manifest within our accepted norms and practices. In these terms, we can see the challenge as latent, but emergent in sometimes unexpected forms. Consequently, counter-hegemonic action may not need to take the form of overt anti-capitalism, and given that a focus on ideological affinity can serve to alienate many in our seemingly post-political state (ibid), a more nuanced approach could more successfully tackle the problems now evident with the neoliberalisation of nature.

Here the power of seemingly innocuous actions comes to the fore, as they are not explicit or even intentionally political actions. Instead, they can be seen as lifestyle choices and routine behaviours that are attractive and pleasurable to the individual, and do not require confrontation and continuous objection to a system of governance. With the farmers interviewed here, it is evident that their everyday actions and understandings demonstrate important forms of opposition to neoliberal norms, which may be more effectively supported by not framing them as political statements. This is both in terms of the way academics and policy advisors frame ‘more-than-neoliberal’ actions to advocates of PES, and the ways in which farmers are engaged directly. In other words, by undermining market solutions in a more step-by-step fashion, without any reference to a broader ideological project, critical scholars and practitioners can get beyond the knee-jerk reaction against alternative visions.

Of course this is problematic on some levels, because there is a fear that alternatives become co-opted if they are not overtly political, and increasingly the analysis of crisis has reasserted the importance of more fundamental critique (Buscher and Arsel 2012; Harvey 2006). Even when opposition is overtly political, the existence of such openings *within* a wider capitalist reality continues to challenge the possibility of autonomy (Boehm et.al 2010; Pickerill and Krinsky 2012). This also poses the threat of ‘recuperation’ through a re-inscription of escaping ‘flows’ within ‘the system’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1984), or the reproduction of the very practices one tries to escape (Robinson 2007).

But equally, as Ferguson (2010) has outlined, perhaps the Left needs to reflect on whether there is anything we can use from neoliberal tool box to advance our own aims. For example, could we refigure markets to advance different models of exchange that are equitable and environmentally just? Or should we return to Polanyi (1944) in his instruction that some things really should not be commodified, and only by acknowledging the wider embeddedness of the economy within social and environmental processes can we create fair and effective models of governance?

## **5. Conclusions**

The theorisation of neoliberal governmentality has provided some important insights into the advance and maintenance of neoliberal hegemony over recent years, by enabling us to explore how market-based solutions are seen to fit with desirable models of behaviour and identity within the wider populous. Yet it is equally important to acknowledge the ways in which individuals demonstrate *more* than just neoliberal subject positions. Reading for difference is set out here as a useful technique to draw out these otherwise marginalised

affinities and characteristics, which often appear in conjunction with neoliberal practises. Following Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008) the analysis here adopts reading for difference as a political strategy, which acknowledges the performative role of theory in the legitimisation of knowledge, and consequently aims to take alternate discourses seriously, even if there are contradictions and flaws in the challenges they pose.

The analysis here has centred on a reading of farmers' engagement with payments for ecosystem services (PES), to explore the extent to which these stakeholders demonstrate a clear affinity with neoliberal subject positions. PES are seen here as a critical moment in the on-going neoliberalisation of nature, and an important example of how neoliberal governmentality is being advanced on the basis that it is the most effective means of engaging with existing behavioural norms and priorities. Despite many affirmations of neoliberal subjectivity, reading for difference is used here to highlight some key contests to that dominant narrative in the everyday priorities of the farming community.

Specifically, it has been argued that economic incentives are not a primary determinant on behaviour, with the long term viability of the farm placed above the imperative of short term financial gain. Equally, farmers' understanding of food production as a multifunctional process; their questioning of market governance as the most socially equitable system; and the central role of co-operative working, are all seen to counter a narrow neoliberal understanding of behaviour.

Whilst the priorities outlined could be read as conservative and regressive in some instances, they pose a significant challenge to the framing of farmers as economically motivated individualists. Asserting the plurality of farmers' subject positions, and their reflective ability

in assessing different priorities, an essentialist argument for market based solutions is undermined. As such, the apparently ‘pragmatic’ stance of environmentalists advocating economic valuation and market solutions is exposed as naïve. Instead, it is argued that a more hybrid solution, involving a continued role for State control is critical to the management of common environmental goods. But equally, a greater focus on community involvement, and improving the political processes associated with environmental management, is key to addressing the deficit in stakeholder control and responsibility evident in previous models of governance.

These arguments are critical not only in the face of increasing interest in PES, but equally in light of recent food prices hikes and a push to return productivism within agricultural policy; albeit in the guise of ‘sustainable intensification’ (Potter 2009). Whilst there has been clear acknowledgement from many quarters that ‘food is different’ (Rosset 2006; Weis 2007), farmers are under increasing pressure across the globe to subscribe to market reforms. At this juncture, it is all the more important to acclaim the existence of alternatives, particularly in instances where it is more hidden as this paper has aimed to do, in order to incite popular consciousness and support existing agrarian movements such as Via Campesina (Desmarais 2007; Wittman et.al 2010). Whilst the overt politics of social movements may be less palatable to some, the everyday focus of reading for difference provides another avenue, enabling us to counter the de-politicisation effected through governmentality, by reasserting the power embedded in our routine practice and inter-relations as a means to create socio-ecological metabolisms in more just and equitable forms.

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